

Promoting Learner Autonomy and Language Awareness Through Blogging

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Abstract

The benefits of learner Weblogs, or blogs as they are more commonly known, have been reported in various educational contexts in recent years. In the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language (EFL), learner-created blogs have been cited as a way of developing language skills and promoting learner autonomy (Harwood, 2010; Illés, 2012). This paper reports on the use of a class blog with a group of English language learners at Niigata University of International and Information Studies (NUIS). It describes the procedures involved in and the results of implementing blogging activities. Content analysis of the students' blog posts and observation of in-class blogging activities revealed the benefits of the project. These included the development of language awareness and provision of genuine communication opportunities. However, some problems also emerged, mostly related to learner motivation, confidence and autonomy. The findings of this paper may be useful to those interested in the use of blogs in EFL learning contexts.

Key words: blogs, EFL, learner autonomy, collaborative learning, peer correction.

Introduction

The learning benefits of using Weblogs (or blogs) as a pedagogical tool have been widely documented across a range of educational contexts in the last decade. The area of EFL teaching and learning is no exception. It has been claimed that blogs can help develop learner autonomy and grammatical awareness (Harwood, 2010; Illés, 2012) as well as provide opportunities for peer learning and collaboration (Dieu, 2004; Trajtemberg & Yiakoumetti, 2011). However, there is a need for more studies on the use of blogs in the Japanese EFL context. This paper reports on the use of blogging in a communicative English language class at Niigata University of International and Information Studies (NUIS). It describes the procedures involved in incorporating blogging into the syllabus and how the blog was used. It also presents and discusses the findings of content analysis of students' blog posts and comments, including end-of-course feedback on the blogging activities.

Blogging and language learning

In the last decade the use of blogs in EFL learning and teaching has attracted considerable

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research attention and the learning benefits have been widely reported. This increased interest in and use of blogging in language learning has been facilitated by the development of new computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies and strongly influenced by a sociocultural perspective on second language acquisition (Lantolf, 2000). As Trajtemberg & Yakoumetti (2011) point out, the sociocultural approach, based on L. S. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of mind, stresses the role of social interaction in creating a suitable environment for learning language and to learning about language through language. It also emphasizes the importance of understanding that all discourse is reflective of the meaning-making process between people in a given social context and is, therefore, dialogical. In addition, Vygotsky viewed learning and teaching as both exploratory and collaborative. Blogs can provide language learners a unique site that promotes social interaction and collaborative learning in the target language (Trajtemberg & Yakoumetti, 2011). Unsurprisingly, therefore, a number of research studies have explored the use of blogs in EFL teaching and learning. (Harwood, 2010; Pinkman, 2005; Ward, 2004, Zhang, 2009).

This research has highlighted the potential benefits of blogs for language learning. Harwood (2010) notes that blogs can be a useful and adaptable learning aid that can promote student centered learning through blog activities and assignments that encourage students to communicate closely within their groups. Trajtemberg & Yakoumetti (2011) list several benefits of blogs for foreign language learning. These include the scaffolding that is promoted by having less knowledgeable learners interacting with their more advanced peers and being exposed to their work and the autonomy and empowerment this may provide in fostering learners' confidence and desire to write. They claim that due to the highly collaborative nature of blogs and the fact that learners have both their own and their peers' writing constantly available, learners have opportunities for "increased reflection and awareness about language [that] may foster a greater level of self-expression and self-evaluation" (Trajtemberg & Yakoumetti, 2011, p. 438). The present study aims to explore the language learning benefits of implementing student blogging activities in a Japanese EFL setting and to provide evidence that may be of use to those interested in using learner blogs in similar contexts.

Blogging and learner autonomy

Learner autonomy has widely been defined as the ability of learners to take charge of their own learning (Benson, 2007). Using this concept of learner autonomy, Harwood (2010, p. 2) states that blogging activities are one way of moving students towards independent learning as, used appropriately, they can enable students to "use each other as a learning resource and in the process begin to take charge of and responsibility for their own learning".

Revisiting the concept of learner autonomy, Illés (2012, p. 509) argues that as a result of changes in the use of English and the subsequent focus on communication processes learner autonomy

should include the ability to manage the linguistic and schematic diversity, the fluidity, and the increased demand for negotiation that interaction in international contexts of use presents. The aim therefore should be to become competent language

users who can successfully cope with the demands of real-life communication under their own initiative.

Consequently, “learner autonomy can be defined as the capacity to become competent speakers of the target language who are able to exploit the linguistic and other resources at their disposal effectively and creatively” (Illés, 2012, p. 509). Illés claims tasks such as learner blogs are able to create conditions for improving language and technical skills as well as the development of autonomy in terms of both learning and language use. She notes that by encouraging self-expression blogs can bring the learners’ own world into the classroom thus helping them appropriate English and make it part of their everyday existence and experience.

Studies such as Trajtemberg & Yakoumetti (2011) and Harwood (2010) have shown the benefits of learners creating blogs in their target language. In the project reported in Trajtemberg & Yakoumetti (2011, p. 443) blogs provided opportunities for learners to learn both new language and technology as well as allowed them “to find their own voice and writing style”. One of the aims of the present study is to use blogging to develop learner autonomy in the sense it is described here. It also hopes to provide some evidence as to how blogs might best be used to achieve such an aim.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were ten Japanese learners of English (7 female, 3 male) of varying proficiencies enrolled in a communicative English program class at NUIS. All participants were second or third year students at the university and had passed the one-year, semi-intensive Communicative English Program (CEP) in their first year of study. Four students had recently returned from a study abroad program in the USA. The proficiency levels of participants varied from false beginner to upper-intermediate.

Procedures

The initial classes of the semester were predominantly teacher-led as the blogging project was introduced and the procedures were explained. Several language awareness sessions were also held in these classes. In these sessions students were made aware of and gained practice in identifying common errors in their own writing. These initial lessons also provided the teachers the opportunity to assess the varying abilities of the learners in order to decide the best pairings for blogging partners. The class blog was set up on a free blogging platform. The students then learned how to access the class blog and how to add blog posts and comments.

Students were asked to write one blog post per week of a minimum 150 words. In most weeks students had control over topic choice, but on a couple of occasions topics were provided from subjects covered in class. Students were also told to read and post a comment of at least 100 words on their blogging partner’s weekly post. To save time students were instructed to first type their blog post in a document before copying and pasting it into the blog itself. While this was ongoing, further in-class language awareness and error correction sessions were held. When it

was felt that the students had sufficient confidence and skills in this area, they were then instructed to, when reading their partner's weekly blog post, look for any mistakes and to suggest corrections. An example of one such suggestion is presented here:

In line 5, you write "You know~" but I think you need to write "As you know".

After reading their partner's comment on their post, the original blogger then revised and re-posted it. Students completed eleven blog posts in total. In order to collect feedback students were asked to evaluate the blogging activities in their final blog post. Apart from introductory example blog posts the teachers did not regularly blog or comment on students' posts. However, they made occasional posts to encourage learners and to provide further opportunities for interaction and error correction practice.

Data collection and analysis

At the completion of the blogging project the blog posts and comments were copied and pasted into a document for ease of analysis. Content analysis was undertaken to examine interaction between learners in their blog posts, to detect improvement or otherwise in written fluency and accuracy, and to reveal common themes in the students' impressions on the blogging activities.

Results

Blogs

In this section I will present findings based on content analysis of the student blogs. As mentioned, students were asked to write a weekly blog post of at least 150 words and make a comment of 100 words or more on their blogging partner's post. All students consistently wrote their blog posts and commented on their partner's posts in a timely manner. The content of the weekly blog posts generally focused on activities from the students' lives, such as what they had done in their free time, or on special events such as a birthday or getting a driving license. However, as discussed, on a few occasions students were asked to write a blog post on a topic they were studying in class.

Judging from the friendly exchanges that occurred between partners in their posts, it appeared that the students enjoyed using the blog to communicate with each other. However, it was noticeable that the blog posts generally did not exceed the minimum 150 word limit and occasionally some students did not write enough and had to be reminded to write more. This did not appear related to proficiency as the students concerned were among the most proficient in the class.

Commenting on each other's blog posts was the other important aspect of the blogging activities. Initially, these comments were content-related, but later also included suggested corrections or improvements to the post. It was hoped that the collaborative peer-based nature of these activities would help promote both language awareness as well as learner autonomy by reducing the amount of teacher dependency. At first, comments highlighting perceived errors were quite thorough. However, as the semester progressed comments highlighting errors became

shorter. While in some cases this was because the blog post in question did not have any obvious problems, there were also several instances where students stated that they could not find any errors in posts where several basic errors were present.

These two findings contrast with those reported in Harwood (2010) where 80% of learners posted in excess of the minimum number of posts and comments. They also differ from one of the key findings of Trajtemberg & Yakoumetti (2011, p. 442), that despite not being compulsory, commenting took place from the beginning of the course and was “a powerful tool that triggered interaction and communication among students”. Possible reasons for these differences in the quantity of blog posts and comments in these previous studies and the present study will be discussed in the discussion section.

Notwithstanding the above issues related to the quantity of writing, it was apparent that the overall quality of writing did improve, especially for the less proficient learners. In this it seems that the conscious attention that participants needed to give to the accuracy and appropriateness of not only their own writing, but also the writing of their blogging partners was beneficial. Learners may have learned directly from the feedback they received on their writing from their partners. The benefits of this aspect of the collaborative learning they engaged in was also widely mentioned in end-of-course student feedback on the blogging activities, which will now be considered.

Comments from students

In this section the findings of content analysis of student feedback on the blogging activities are presented. In order to gather feedback students were asked to write their impressions of the blogging activities in their final blog post. As this was not done anonymously there was a concern that the students may write what that they thought the teachers expected rather than give their honest opinions. However, as many students gave both positive and critical feedback this did not reveal itself as a problem.

Content analysis of the students' comments revealed several common themes. I will first present the common themes of positive comments on the blogging activities before considering those seen in the more critical feedback. One of the most common themes emerging from the positive feedback related to the collaborative learning that occurred, especially that enabled by the peer correction of each other's posts. Most students commented how having peers read and suggest corrections for their posts made them aware not only of existing language use problems, but also exposed them to new language in the form of previously unknown vocabulary and grammatical structures. Here are some examples of student comments on this theme:

In my opinion, to correct my partner's blogs is important for me, because I can aware my mistakes of grammar and vocabulary by correcting from my partner. I think it is difficult to find these mistake by own.

Y___ often corrected my mistakes, so I noticed some mistakes about grammar and spelling, and I could correct it ... In addition, I learned a lot of new words and phrases that I didn't know. When I found new word, I could look up that word in a dictionary.

I'm happy when I learned new words!

When I wrote some mistakes word, I couldn't notice. It was so serious problem. However, someone found them and commented correct sentences. I also learned many word and phrases.

These comments concur with the findings reported in Harwood (2010), where 100% of students reported that receiving feedback from a blogging partner was an effective way of improving their posts and 80% stated they had learnt grammar from their peers.

Many students also thought that the blogging activities helped improve their writing and, in some cases, speaking skills, as the following comment explains:

I think using blog is good way to improve our English skills, because as you know, we don't have enough chance to write something in English except English class. I'm sure writing in English is positive methods not only to improve writing skill, but also to improve speaking skill.

Another common theme in positive student comments highlighted the benefits of the communicative opportunities blogging provided. Many students wrote that the class blog was a valuable communicative tool that enabled them to communicate with and learn more about their classmates. Here is a sample of comments on this theme:

The best thing is that I can communicate with my classmates! I can know some new things about them. There are some students who talk with me at only CEP class but I can communicate with them by commenting, so it's good tool.

And by commenting our blogs, we can communicate with people who take CEP class even if different ages. In addition, we can know our characters, favorite things and so on through our blogs.

I enjoyed communicating with other student. I could know something about other student such as how did they spend weekend, their part-time jobs, club activities and the interesting dreams that they dreamed ... It became the source of conversation with other students after classes.

I will now consider the common themes that emerged from more critical student feedback on the blogging activities. A few learners found the amount of writing required for blog posts and comments problematic, as the following comment indicates:

But I think it was difficult for me to clear the workload that use 150 words in a blog every week. And it was difficult for me to use 100 words when I commented someone's post.

As the 150 word minimum was decided on after carrying out 20-minute timed free writing activities in class prior to commencing the blogging activities, it is difficult to understand why a few students found it difficult to write this amount. I will discuss possible reasons for this in the discussion section.

Some learners indicated a desire for a higher level of teacher involvement in the blogging project, particularly for advice about language usage:

I think to write blog in English is good things. But I want to advice about mistaken in my blog from [the teachers]. Then I will be able to speak English more I think.

I wanted to ask someone what is correct grammer. I also found new vocabularies for me. I learned that there were other vocabularies to tell something, but I sometimes felt those words were used by strenge way to say something. My questions weren't solved even if I found strange phrases, so it was really good way or not. Perhaps I had to ask [the teachers] to solve this problem when I couldn't correct phrases, vocabularies, and grammer.

It is interesting that these two learners indicated that they had wanted to ask the teachers for advice about correct language use, but for some reason did not, although they had ample opportunities to do so either via the blog or in person. Possible reasons for this could have been a simple misunderstanding that they were not allowed to ask for advice or just an unexplained reluctance to do so. The implications of this apparent desire for more teacher-dependent activity will be discussed further in the following section.

Discussion

In this section I will discuss the implications of the key findings. It was found that the blogging activities had several learning benefits for this group of learners. One of the benefits was the peer-based learning that took place. The quality of the students' writing, in terms of grammar and vocabulary usage, improved during the course. Many students also commented that they had learned new grammar and vocabulary by collaborating with their peers via posts and comments on the blog. As a result, most learners became noticeably less teacher dependent as the course went on.

Another benefit of the blog was the opportunities it provided for communication in a genuine context, which resulted in learners getting to know each other more and, in the process, developing interpersonal skills, as well as better personal and in-class working relationships. As a result of the trust that developed between learners from their interactions on the blog and the opportunities such interactions provided for self-expression, most students became more independent learners. Such findings, in line with those reported in Harwood (2010) and Trajtemberg & Yakoumetti (2011), lend support to the efficacy of using blogs to facilitate peer-based collaborative learning.

However, despite these benefits the problems that emerged during the study need to be

considered. It was seen that a few learners had difficulties meeting the minimum word limit of 150 words for posts and 100 words for comments. As these word limits could not be considered excessive as, based on prior measurement of participants' own writing speed, they could reasonably be expected to have been met in no more than 1 hour per week at most, it was difficult to understand why these students had difficulties. Interviews with the students concerned may have revealed more specific reasons, but these were not done. A possible reason may be that the students had little experience writing in English before and therefore found it difficult to write this amount. However, as mentioned, the word limit was based on the average amount that students themselves had written in 20-minute free writing activities in class. Another possible reason could be related to motivation, with the students concerned having a dislike for writing in English in general or an unwillingness to communicate openly about their lives. Confidence may also have played a role in the difficulties these students had in meeting the word limit. As seen, some learners expressed a lack of confidence in their use and understanding of English. Perhaps these students spent a lot of time thinking about how to express themselves "correctly", which in itself could be a result of their previous English learning experiences in the Japanese educational context.

These problems were not found in the projects reported in Harwood (2010), undertaken in Singapore, or Trajtemberg & Yakoumetti (2011), carried out in Chile, where students wrote more than they were expected. While sociocultural differences cannot be discounted as a factor that may have affected the amount of writing and student interaction, a difference between the present study and these previous studies which may be even more important is the type and level of teacher involvement in the blogging activities. In both of the previous studies teachers regularly blogged and interacted with the students, often initiating interaction. Trajtemberg & Yakoumetti (2011) state that in their blog project teacher-initiated interaction played an important role in stimulating student interaction and communication. However, in the present study the level of teacher-initiated interaction was much less. It seems likely that a higher level of teacher involvement and interaction in the blog may have provided further motivation and promoted more interaction among students.

The level of teacher involvement was also commented on in student feedback on the blogging activities. As reported, two students indicated that they had wanted, but for unknown reasons did not ask for, advice concerning grammar or vocabulary from their teachers. This apparent need for a more teacher dependent approach to learning is perhaps to be expected in Japan, where students are more accustomed to teacher-centered learning. This has implications for using blogging activities with learners in similar contexts. Such activities would need to take account of the learners' preferences and expectations as well as their previous learning experiences. In some situations, it may be necessary to begin with a high level of teacher dependency before gradually increasing the level of independent and peer-based collaborative learning as the learners become more comfortable with such an approach.

Conclusion

This paper has described how a class blog was used to promote language awareness and learner autonomy with a group of Japanese EFL learners. The use of blogging activities clearly benefited the learners by enabling them to become more independent in their learning and by providing opportunities for communicating in English in a meaningful, genuine context. It was also seen how the interaction and collaboration that using blogs in this way makes possible developed both interpersonal and language skills. Although it was seen that some learners would have preferred more teacher-initiated interaction, which is something to note when designing and implementing blog-based activities, overall it appeared that learners enjoyed and benefited greatly from interacting with and learning from their peers on the blog. Blogs can clearly assist EFL learners become more independent learners and provide a collaborative space for self-expression, peer learning and interaction. Determining how to use blogs to best meet learners' needs in any given context is not without its challenges, but the potential rewards are clear to see.

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